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From collective memory to commemoration

Hiro Saito

To have "memory" of an event, humans have to experience it themselves. Learning of an event secondhand, humans acquire knowledge, but not memory. Yet, when sociologists speak of "collective memory," they routinely include as agents of memory those who do not have firsthand experience of a past event. This inclusion has been taken for granted ever since Maurice Halbwachs (1992) formulated his Durkheimian theory of the relationship between collective memory and commemoration in terms of group solidarity and identity: collective memory emerges when those without firsthand experience of an event identify with those who have such experience, defining both sets of actors as sharing membership in the same social group. The creation of this affect-laden, first-person orientation to a past event is at the crux of *commemoration*—simply put, a ritual that transforms "historical knowledge" into "collective memory" consisting of mnemonic schemas and objects that define meaning of a past event as a locus of collective identity. According to Halbwachs's formulation, commemoration is a vehicle of collective memory.

Below, I first elaborate Halbwachs's theory, which has dominated the sociology of commemoration, by drawing on more recent sociological theories of ritual and collective identity. I then critically evaluate the dominant Durkheimian theory of commemoration by examining four empirical phenomena that have not been addressed adequately in the existing literature: (1) commemorations of negative events or difficult pasts, wherein commemoration serves not to produce shared mnemonic schemas, but, rather, to preserve struggles over meaning of mnemonic objects; (2) the understudied role of political organizations and social movements in the making and remaking of commemorative rituals; (3) the fundamentally temporal nature of commemoration, which calls for a more historical approach to both continuities and discontinuities in the ways actors reiterate commemorative rituals over time; and (4) the incipient rescaling of commemoration from national to transnational arenas and actors, reconfiguring the connection between national identity and collective memory in an increasingly global world.

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Commemoration as ritual

Human social life is marked and made meaningful by an array of commemorative practices. Various anniversaries mark our collective calendar—Independence Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and September 11th, to name only a few American examples. When humans commemorate—whatever the scale of commemoration may be—they always do so as members of a social group, be it a family, a school, a city, or a nation. Their membership in these groups does not simply pre-exist this process, but is actually constituted *through* commemoration. By providing actors with objects and performances that narrate a past event as part of a shared group identity, commemoration constitutes social groups. Furthermore, because autobiographical memories are crucial to generating and maintaining individuals' sense of personal identity, commemoration provides people with autobiographical narratives of their purportedly shared past as a group and induces them to feel and accept such narratives as authentic.

The felt authentication of a collective autobiography is made possible by the ritual nature of commemoration. As Randall Collins (2004: 42) has argued, rituals are "occasions that combine a high degree of mutual focus of attention, that is, a high degree of intersubjectivity, together with a high degree of emotional entrainment … [which] result[s] in feelings of membership that are attached to cognitive symbols." The collective effervescence that commemoration generates by virtue of its ritual nature helps participants feel authentic about autobiographical narratives of their purportedly shared past. Alexander (2004a: 527) has further unpacked the nature of rituals as "episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions." Commemorations capitalize on this affective power of rituals to prompt participants to generate mutual identifications as members of a social group. Thus Collins's and Alexander's theories of ritual reinforce the Durkheimian point of Halbwachs's theory of commemoration: commemoration is an "alchemy" that transforms historical knowledge into collective memory, making emotionally charged interpretation of past events integral to people's social identities as they shift from a subject position of audience/observers to actors/participants.

This kind of imaginary identification with participants of a past event is most intense and visible in cases of traumatic events (LaCapra 2001), but sociologists have considered such identification a defining feature of "collective memory" in general. What the sociological concept of collective memory is meant to capture is the misrecognition of secondhand knowledge as living memory by virtue of identifications on the part of participants in commemoration. When commemorative rituals succeed in providing people with vicarious experience of a past event, secondhand knowledge begins to be felt as living memory among those who lack firsthand experience. In symbolic-interactionist terms (Fine and Beim 2007), participants of commemorative rituals take attitudes of those who have firsthand experience. Commemorative rituals typically force such symbolic interactions by presenting those who have firsthand experience as the center of the rituals. This setup tends to lead those who lack firsthand experience to fix their attention on those with firsthand experience and induce the former to experience a past event vicariously from the imaginary first-person perspective of the latter. Emotional intensity of commemorative rituals, exemplified by moments of collective effervescence, promotes such misrecognition and imagination of secondhand knowledge as shared living memory.

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For commemorative practices to constitute a social group, however, not all members have to be present in the same physical space. As is the case with national anniversaries, mutual awareness that other members of the nation in other places are marking the same occasion helps to produce feelings of group membership and solidarity among individuals. Print capitalism facilitated the formation of national communities (Anderson 1991) partly because it enabled commemorative rituals, such as Independence Day, to extend beyond face-to-face interactions; increasingly distant people were able to imagine their shared participation in commemorative rituals as members of the same social group. Today, mass media play a decisive role in generating collective memories at the national level (Dayan and Katz 1992). Whether and how an event is represented in mass media thus constitutes an important realm for the sociological analysis of commemoration.

Moreover, as implied by Alexander's formulation, "symbolic objects" play an important role in commemorative rituals. Not only do such objects provide focal points for participants' attention, but the contents of symbolic objects shape mnemonic schemas and patterns of thinking and feeling about the purportedly shared past. It is important to emphasize here that symbolic objects are *multimodal*: they generate meaning in multiple registers, including not only the verbal-linguistic, but also visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactual registers. Symbolic objects in the context of commemorative rituals thus constitute built environments that operate as gigantic mnemonics, enveloping participants. The disappearance of "*milieux de mémoire*" observed by Pierre Nora (1989) is largely due to the rapid and radical transformation of built environments within modernity. Technological, economic, and demographic changes ushered in by industrialization and urbanization uprooted people from the built environments that had previously served as mnemonics of their past. Creatively rethinking the phrase "out of sight, out of mind" as "out of site, out of mind" nicely captures the constitutive role of built environments in human memory. When the built environments that people inhabit change, what they remember and how they remember it also change. Mnemonic schemas are always mediated by mnemonic objects. From this perspective, "collective memory" is best understood as being "distributed" partly in human actors themselves, and partly in the world of mnemonics (Wertsch 2002).

In sum, following Halbwachs's Durkheimian formulation, sociologists have largely studied commemoration as a vehicle generating group solidarity and collective identity through the distribution and enforcement of shared mnemonic schemas and objects. Although this Durkheimian approach captures important aspects of commemoration, I argue that it fails to pay sufficient attention to key empirical phenomena that need to be addressed by any theory of commemoration. In what follows, I unpack these understudied empirical phenomena and their theoretical implications.

Commemoration of a difficult past

The Durkheimian perspective holds up best in the case of "positive events"—for example the attainment of political independence or a clear-cut military victory—events that generate collective effervescence and reinforce desirable images of collective identity. But what if events present moral ambiguities and controversies, and rituals do not resolve but rather preserve and even foreground such difficulties? Halbwachs's theory of commemoration is ill equipped to analyze such instances. Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz (1991: 384) were the first to highlight this analytic lacuna when they

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pointed out the need to study "negative events," that is, moral traumas that "not only result in loss or failure but also evoke disagreement and inspire censure." Their work highlighted the Vietnam War as one such negative event or "difficult past" for Americans: various groups of actors, from veterans to peace activists, not only fail to share a unified mnemonic schema for interpreting the event, but also continue to contest the meaning of key mnemonic objects meant to commemorate it. Here, negative events as moral traumas must be distinguished from "cultural traumas" as theorized by Alexander (2004b). Although both moral and cultural traumas can be triggered by events that psychologically traumatize individual members of a social group, the former divide group members by preserving moral ambiguities of the events, while the latter unify group members by elevating victims to the status of a group totem. Put somewhat differently, moral traumas are the result of *failed* commemorative rituals, in which participants are unable to generate solidarity and mutual identification with one another. In a sense, then, the concept of negative events as moral traumas purports to be anti-Durkheimian.

Although Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz shed light on an understudied phenomenon, they fail to explore a more fundamental weakness of the Durkheimian theory of commemoration. In their discussion of the Vietnam War, the authors present various groups as disagreeing about the meaning of specific mnemonic objects, yet sharing an implicit understanding that the event is significant for Americans as a collective. There is no discussion of cases in which American citizens dis-identified with the United States itself, or, even more radically, identified with the Vietnamese instead. Whether this character of the analysis is due to nationalism among the historical actors or methodological nationalism in Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz's analysis is unclear, but the point is that the United States is taken for granted as the scale of commemoration: the nation as master frame of collective identity is never called in question.

The critique offered by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz could also be countered with a Durkheimian response that the Vietnam War is only one of many historical events from which Americans can choose to narrate their collective identity. Although every national state is confronted with both "difficult" and "easy" pasts, politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary people tend to over-commemorate past events that are relatively easy to render as triumphant narratives. In light of this preponderance of positive commemorations, the authors' case study of the Vietnam War Memorial does not sufficiently challenge the Durkheimian assertion that commemorations generally facilitate the creation of group identity and solidarity. Arguably the national state can afford to have some failed commemorative rituals and moral traumas, so long as it has other, more high-profile rituals that succeed.

Nonetheless, I find the critique offered by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz of Durkheimian theory to be an effective one. However, I would also argue that their real contribution actually lies in another direction. What is most valuable about their study is not so much its focus on the commemoration of negative events or difficult pasts in and of themselves, but its focus on the dynamics of political contention that characterize any commemorative ritual, positive or negative. I elaborate this point in the following section.

Political contentions in commemoration

Functionalist theories are generally weak in accounting for micro interactions and contentions that lead to the emergence and transformation of social institutions.

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The Durkheimian theory of commemoration is no exception. Since the ultimate function of commemoration is specified *a priori* as the constitution of collective identity, sociologists of commemoration tend to pay scant attention to social movements and political organizations involved in the production and interpretation of mnemonic objects. Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz made a novel contribution when they detailed how the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial was initiated by a group of politicians, contested by veterans, and debated by journalists and artists. In a similar vein, Vera Zolberg's (1998) study of controversies surrounding the 1996 Smithsonian exhibit on the bombing of Hiroshima, and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi's (2002) study of efforts to commemorate the legacy of Yitzhak Rabin capture a strong sense of the political contentions involved in commemoration. These works highlight how different groups mobilize and contest commemorations so as to promote their particular versions of collective memory, thus advancing their own political interests and symbolic legitimacy.

All commemorative rituals, whether they succeed or fail, can be argued to have this undercurrent of dynamic interaction among political organizations and social movements. Consider, for example, postwar Japanese commemoration of the bombing of Hiroshima (Saito 2006). In the immediate aftermath of World War II, there was no national commemoration of the atom bombing: commemorative rituals were fragmented among different groups of actors, such as A-bomb survivors and politicians. Then, the hydrogen-bomb fallout in 1954 caused a cascade of changes in the Japanese commemoration of the atom bombing, elevating "Hiroshima" to the cultural trauma constitutive of postwar Japanese national identity as the pacifist nation of nuclear victims. Importantly, however, such a reframing of Hiroshima as a symbol of Japanese national and moral unity would not have occurred without the mobilization of social-movement organizations and the formation of a coalition among political parties. Moreover, even after national commemoration of the event was institutionalized, the public meaning of "Hiroshima" remained multivocal. Although the initial fragmentation of commemoration was overcome in 1954, different interpretations of mnemonic objects were never unified but rather brought together into dialogue within the shared commemorative ritual.

Categorical distinctions between commemorations of negative or positive events, or between moral or cultural traumas, are less helpful here than a recognition that all commemorative rituals are permeated by dynamics of political contention, albeit to different degrees. The sociology of commemoration thus has much to gain by engaging more extensively with scholarship on political organizations and social movements. In addition to the dominance of Durkheimian functionalism, the sociology of commemoration has been dominated by "endogenous" cultural explanations (Kaufman 2004). That is, sociologists of commemoration have tended to concentrate on the meaning of mnemonic objects without considering the links between such objects and "exogenous" variables such as material resources and political opportunities that may shape their production. The popularity of endogenous cultural explanation in the sociology of commemoration is due, in part, to the topic's resurgence at the same time that a new "cultural sociology" emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to the extant "sociology of culture." The new "cultural turn" took very seriously the autonomy of the symbolic system from social structures, in contrast to an older tradition that tended to explain the symbolic system through reference to exogenous, non-symbolic variables. Sociologists such as Jason Kaufman (2004), however, have recently begun to argue that sociologists should launch a concerted effort to synthesize endogenous and exogenous

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cultural explanations. Such approaches would enable us to understand how mnemonic objects and their meanings are constituted not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to actors and organizations that produce, use, contest, and transform mnemonic objects under changing historical circumstances.

This is not to suggest that actors and organizations can simply dictate commemorative rituals according to their present political interests. Once a certain form of commemoration is institutionalized, it tends to persist even in the absence of the causes responsible for its initial institutionalization. Conversely, no commemorations remain completely unchanged or locked in over time, for not all elements of institutions are equally durable. This circumstance is an aspect of the third understudied dimension of commemoration—the problem of temporality.

Reiterated commemoration

Rituals, including commemorative ones, are by definition repeated over time to maintain participants' schemas of thinking and feeling about the world, and acting in it. This reiterative nature of commemorative rituals dovetails with the character of memory itself—better understood as a reiterative process than a static thing or state. In reality, what we call "memory" is an act of remembering or a moment of recollection that always involves reconstruction of past experiences. At the individual level, memory of an event persists only as a reiteration of moments of recollection. Similarly, at the group level, collective memory persists only as a reiteration of commemoration.

The reiterative nature of commemoration poses rather complicated conceptual problems of temporality. Like any other institutionalized practices, commemorative rituals are path-dependent in that it becomes increasingly difficult over time to change arrangements adopted at their founding. Under the veneer of path-dependent persistence, however, some parts of institutionalized commemoration may well be undergoing change in response to new political, cultural, and demographic trends. This kind of incremental change may influence the overall trajectory of commemorative rituals gradually over time or transform them dramatically in conjunction with contingent events. Commemorative rituals thus exhibit a seemingly contradictory combination of continuities and discontinuities because of their fundamentally temporal nature. It is analytically useful, then, to parse out some of the implications of this temporality.

First, the reiteration of commemorations of a past event introduces a "period effect." As the historical conditions in which commemorative rituals take place change over time, so too can the ways in which those rituals are organized. Reiterated commemoration also generates a "cohort effect." As older cohorts exit from commemoration of a past event and newer cohorts enter, the overall composition of mnemonic schemas shifts along with the participants themselves. In the same way that different generations remember different historical events as most important to their lives (Schuman and Scott 1989), different cohorts commemorate the same past event differently on the basis of their unique historical and human-developmental trajectories. Finally, period and cohort effects are further compounded by an "age effect": people change how they commemorate a past event as they move through different stages of their own life courses. Overall, one can refer to "age-period-cohort" (APC) effects in commemoration.

Until now, no sociologists have tried to tackle APC effects in the study of commemoration. This is mainly because sociologists have focused primarily on institutional

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frameworks of commemoration (i.e. the world of mnemonic objects) while bracketing the mnemonic schemas of individual human beings. Within this dominant sociological tradition, researchers have tended to analyze only period effects, while generally ignoring cohort and age effects among individuals who participate in commemorative rituals. I argue, however, that it is time sociologists should take individuals more seriously when thinking about continuities and discontinuities in commemoration. As Andrew Abbott (2005) suggests, human beings are "reservoirs" of mnemonic schemas that encode, preserve, and carry forward from past to present structures from different times and of different trajectories. The diversity of mnemonic schemas that different generations carry inside their bodies can influence existent commemorative rituals towards either continuity or discontinuity. I suggest that APC effects serve as a useful heuristic for sociologists who want to investigate the "wide variety of mnemonic processes, practices, and outcomes, neurological, cognitive, personal, aggregated, and collective" (Olick 1999: 346), that link individuals and institutions in commemorative rituals. If sociologists are to take seriously the reiterative nature of commemoration, they must begin to ask, "How and why do different cohorts of people recollect the same event differently in different periods and over different stages of their lives?" and "How do such age-period-cohort interactions account for continuities and discontinuities in commemorative rituals?"

Furthermore, when tracing APC effects in commemoration, it will be important to contextualize them *vis-à-vis* changes exogenous to the field of commemoration. Although commemorative rituals develop their own internal dynamics over time, they are also structurally articulate with larger demographic, economic, political, and cultural formations. Shifts in these formations can affect the demographic composition of participants in commemorative rituals, change the economic resources available for such rituals, induce actors with particular political interests to enter or exit the field of commemoration, or reconfigure the meanings of mnemonic objects. These exogenous changes all exert effects on commemorative rituals pertaining to the same past event. It is thus imperative for researchers to describe and explain the reiteration of commemoration over time in terms of historical dynamics both internal and external to the field of commemoration itself. This analytical injunction points to the fourth and last set of understudied empirical phenomena—the effects of larger historical conditions on the scale of commemoration.

Nationalism and cosmopolitanism in commemoration

Following Halbwachs, sociologists have continued to study commemorative rituals in terms of the construction of national identity, even though commemoration itself has no intrinsic connection with national identity. The strong, almost quasi-natural association between commemoration and the nation can be linked to the way in which commemorative rituals have been deployed historically as cultural technologies for imagining the nation, as well as to the symbiotic relationship of the discipline of sociology itself to the consolidation of national states at the beginning of the twentieth century. Against the persistent "methodological nationalism" that characterizes studies of commemoration, however, Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznaider explore the question of what they call the "cosmopolitanization" of collective memory at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Levy and Sznaider ask: "Can we imagine collective memories that transcend national and

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ethnic boundaries? If so, we must ask, how do these transnational memory forms come about, and of what do they consist?" (2006: 2).

To answer these questions, Levy and Sznaider analyze the history of Holocaust commemoration since World War II. They argue that commemorations become cosmopolitan when mnemonic objects are de-territorialized from their original geographical locations and transformed into empty signifiers that can be articulated with the commemoration of other events across national borders. According to the authors, globalization and the transnational circulation of mnemonic objects effect the cosmopolitanization of commemoration. As mnemonic objects traverse national borders through networks of electronic communication and transportation, the collectivities that commemorations may constitute are similarly unbound. Reflecting on the changing scale of communities that are being imagined in a global world, Bruce Robbins makes the following point:

> If people can get as emotional as [Benedict] Anderson says they do about relations with fellow nationals they never see face-to-face, then now that print capitalism has become electronic- and digital-capitalism, and now that this system is so clearly transnational, it would be strange if people did *not* get emotional in much the same way, if not necessarily to the same degree, about others who are *not* fellow nationals, people bound to them by some transnational sort of fellowship.
>
> (Robbins 1998: 7)

Globalization—the increasing interdependency of economic, political, and cultural activities in the world—as well as our awareness of globality, makes it possible for people to incorporate into their commemorative rituals the "cosmopolitan" horizon in which voices of multiple nationalities come to be in dialogue with one another (Beck 2004). Within this cosmopolitan horizon, emotional engagement (e.g. empathy and solidarity) can extend beyond the borders of a single nation.

Again, the Japanese commemoration of the bombing of Hiroshima serves as an illustrative example. In 1991 the Peace Declaration at the Peace Memorial Ceremony held in the city of Hiroshima mentioned for the first time atrocities and sufferings that Japan had inflicted on other peoples in Asia. The inclusion signaled a sea change, redefining and rearticulating the commemoration of "Hiroshima" from a solely Japanese national trauma to a trauma linked to other Asian national traumas. Unlike the "Holocaust," "Hiroshima" as a signifier always refers to a specific place enclosed within the territory of the Japanese state; however, what it articulates and commemorates has become "cosmopolitanized" through the inclusion of the sufferings of foreign others. Whereas we might say that nationalist commemoration is *monological* in the sense of confining people's emotional engagement within their ascribed national group, cosmopolitan commemoration is *dialogical*, in that people rearticulate national trauma so as to produce forms of solidarity that traverse national borders.

Interestingly, Levy and Sznaider similarly highlight the 1990s as the time when "Holocaust" became an empty signifier and commemorative frame "dislocated from space and time, resulting in its inscription into other acts of injustice and other traumatic national memories across the globe" (2006: 5). How and why did the parallel cosmopolitanization of the "Holocaust" and "Hiroshima" come about during this period? Globalization, coupled with the worldwide diffusion of human-rights discourse through a growing number of international non-governmental organizations (Boli and

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Thomas 1999) is undoubtedly part of the story—but only part. Sociologists have not yet begun to systematically investigate the evolving relationship between nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalization in commemoration, let alone begun to explore the causal mechanisms through which globalization differentially affects commemorative rituals in different parts of the world.

It is important to point out, however, that cosmopolitanism by no means eliminates nationalism from commemoration. Commemoration of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, for example, can be regarded as cosmopolitan. Victims included not only Americans but also individuals of more than thirty other nationalities, and the unfolding of the attacks was televised in real time across the world. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, people in different national states commemorated "September 11" as an event relevant to humanity-as-a-whole, although the cosmopolitan commemoration varied regionally in terms of its intensity and expression. This cosmopolitanism in the commemoration of "September 11" still persists today. Nevertheless, some American politicians and publics also framed the event as a cultural trauma specifically and especially constitutive of the American nation, using it as a nationalist justification for subsequent military and political actions. Thus, when studying the cosmopolitanization of commemoration against the backdrop of globalization, sociologists would do well to demarcate carefully the complex articulations between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Conclusion

This brief essay offers two take-away messages. The first is that commemoration is a vehicle of collective memory: commemoration is a ritual that emotionally induces people to experience past events vicariously and thereby imagine their secondhand knowledge of those events as living memory that they possess as members of a social group. The second is that sociologists need to address the blind spots of the Durkheimian theory of commemoration by turning their attention to commemorations of difficult pasts, dynamics of political contention within commemoration, problems of temporality, and the incipient decoupling of commemoration from the nation. Commemoration condenses a multiplicity of important theoretical and empirical problems, including but not limited to rituals, traumas, time, nationalism, and globalization. Hopefully, sociological studies of commemoration will expand and develop the multifaceted perspectives necessary to capture this complex and fascinating phenomenon.

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